

Senator Steven Panagiotakos
Chair, Senate Ways and Means Committee
State House, Room 212
Boston, MA 02133

Representative Charles Murphy
Chair, House Ways and Means Committee
State House, Room 243
Boston, MA 02133

We are writing to thank you for allocating over \$2 million in funds to support DCR's Park Operations in the FY11 supplementary budget that was enacted this week. As you may know, without those funds, the budget for the Department of Conservation and Recreation for the current fiscal year was significantly underfunded such that DCR would have only had funds to operate about 25 of its most highly visited parks, state forests, and reservations at previous service levels. All others would have had to close or revert to seasonal only operation. "Close" would mean no staff; up until this time 200 have had staff at least shared with other parks. As we all know, "closing" a park does not mean that people will not go into the park; it means that there will be no staff there to assist the public or to keep an eye on our public property to prevent or at least limit in appropriate or illegal behavior.

This situation comes after years of declining budgets for our state parks, in the midst of the major recession. Between FY07 and FY10, DCR's operating budget dropped almost \$22 million (more than 22% on a real basis). This has resulted in the loss of over 170 employees, or more than 18%, of its full time workforce through layoffs, incentivized early retirements and forced vacancies. These reductions have included park supervisors, carpenters, mechanics and laborers – the troops on the ground that are essential to providing safe and enjoyable experiences in our parks. The staff shortage has resulted in delays of course, including in planned renovations to a park in Amherst. Thanks to your leadership, the recent restoration of some funding for FY11 will help DCR to avoid the worst case scenario and curtail many of the planned park closures. However, in order for the agency to keep the parks system intact and provide a sustained level of service into FY12 which of course begins during the height of the recreation season, the agency desperately needs your support for more funding in the FY12 operating budget.

To put this in context, the FY10 DCR operating budget (\$78.8 million) was, on an inflation adjusted basis, \$4.4 million below the lowest budget appropriated to DCR in the last 25 years (2004) and \$151 million below the agency's 25-year, inflation-adjusted budget high water mark (1988). With the FY11 budget (\$70.6 million), DCR has had to manage a reduction in operating resources of more than 30% over four years.

We, as local officials, recognize that the budget for the coming year will be even more difficult than it is for this year. However, Amherst is a town whose residents value the habitat, wildlife, ecological services and recreation provided by forests and other open spaces; we consider ourselves fortunate to live in a region with many DCR facilities, particularly the two that are

partially in Amherst (the Mount Holyoke Range State Park and the Norwottuck Rail Trail). We are concerned about both the degradation to the parks that “closing” will contribute to, and the dangers to the safety of our residents who will continue to use unsupervised and unmaintained parks.

We urge you to do your best to restore funding to the parks as you develop the State’s budget for FY12.

Amherst Select Board